

**6.18** Partnership between organisations and sectors, and the participation of people and communities, is as important to the testing of the health impact assessment approach as it is to wider action to improve the health and well-being of people in Wales. Among a number of developments which will stimulate and facilitate partnerships in Wales are:

- Local Health Alliances
- Health Improvement Plans
- The National Network for Health
- The Wales Centre for Health
- Voluntary Sector Compact

**6.19** While dissemination within Wales is important, it is clear that the health impact approach is being taken up and developed in the rest of the UK, in the Member States of the European Union, and in other countries of the world. It will therefore be important to build on existing links with other countries not only to share experience and learn from others but to tell others of the progress being made in Wales.

**6.20** The opportunity exists for Wales to demonstrate further its commitment to improve health by exploring and developing the use of health impact assessment. This document is intended as a base on which to build and develop future action. The following outlines some of the action which will be taken in the year following publication of this document:

- i) Assessment of support and guidance needed to test and progress the use of health impact assessment in Wales;
- ii) Development of information exchange mechanisms, harnessing where appropriate, the benefits of information technology e.g. e-mail network/forum;
- iii) Series of workshops or 'teach-ins' held in different parts of Wales as a means of increasing awareness of health impact assessment;
- iv) Assessment of broad training and other needs relevant to developing further the use of health impact assessment;
- v) Continued action to test the health impact assessment approach by way of pilot projects undertaken in partnership by different organisations.

**6.21** Detailed plans and action will emerge over time but health impact assessment will feature as a key theme for the Wales Centre for Health and The National Network for Health in Wales.

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# Improving Health and Reducing Inequalities

A practical guide to health impact assessment



## Acknowledgements

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The preparation of this guidance has benefited from multi-disciplinary advice from professionals and practitioners from the Welsh Collaboration for Health and the Environment. It reflects experience of working with NHS organisations in Wales, including the National Public Health Service, Welsh Local Government, Communities First Partnerships and the Welsh Assembly Government on using and developing Health Impact Assessment and draws on guidance used elsewhere in the UK. This document follows the Assembly Government's original guidance on health impact assessment<sup>1</sup>. This document focuses on the practical application of the approach.

The Welsh Health Impact Assessment Support Unit is funded by the Welsh Assembly Government and is operated by the Wales Centre for Health in partnership with Cardiff University. The role of the Unit is to provide advice, guidance and support – including training.

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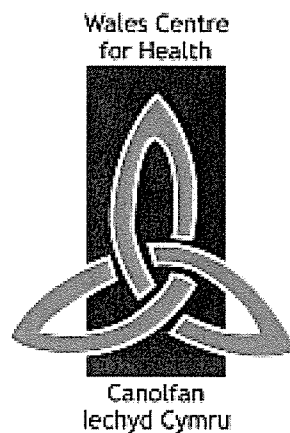
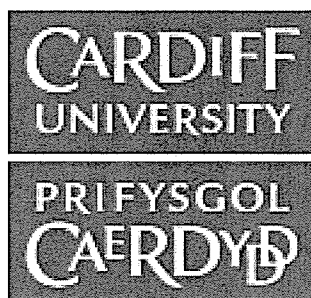
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**Cardiff Institute of Society, Health and Ethics**  
**Athrofa y Gymdeithas, Iechyd a Moeseg Caerdydd**

# Improving Health and Reducing Inequalities

## A practical guide to health impact assessment





## Foreword

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I am very pleased to see the publication of this practical guide to the use of health impact assessment.

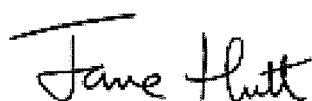
Improving health is one of the most important priorities of our strategic agenda *Wales: A Better Country*. We have made clear our intention to do this by developing more integrated policies and programmes that not only help people to improve their lifestyles but which also tackle the social, economic and environmental factors that affect people's health and well-being.

Health impact assessment is a flexible approach that can help organisations both inside and outside the health sector to identify the connections between their work and people's health and well-being. It can ensure that people's health is taken into account in plans and decision-making and by doing so, help reduce any possible negative impacts on health and increase opportunities to improve health. By considering the possibility of different impacts across parts of the population, health impact assessment can also help to reduce the health inequalities and inequities in access to services that exist between some of our communities and between some groups of people.

I wish to see even more use of health impact assessment in Wales and it is for that reason I established the Welsh Health Impact Assessment Support Unit to help organisations throughout Wales to use the approach. This step-by-step guide, which has been produced by the Unit in partnership with the Assembly Government and with other organisations, will be a valuable source of information for a wide range of organisations and groups. It is particularly relevant to local health boards and to local authorities for local Health, Social Care and Well-Being Strategies and for Community Strategies.

By helping organisations to consider how their services and actions affect people's health and well-being, health impact assessment can also help organisations to play a part in Health Challenge Wales, which is our new national focus for improving health in Wales. Ill health continues to impact on individuals and their families, on business and the economy, and on the demand for our health and social services, yet much of it can be prevented. Health Challenge Wales is a call to all organisations and individuals to join together as part of a national effort.

I commend this guide and encourage you to use it to develop your use of health impact assessment.



Minister for Health and Social Services



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# Introduction

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1. Health impact assessment is a tool that can help organisations to assess the possible consequences of their decisions on people's health and well-being, thereby helping to develop more integrated policies and programmes.
2. This document has been developed as a practical guide to health impact assessment. It is designed to meet the needs of a variety of organisations by explaining the concept, the process and its flexibility, and by providing templates that can be adjusted to suit.
3. The Welsh Assembly Government is committed to developing the use of health impact assessment in Wales as a part of its strategy to improve health and well-being and to reduce health inequalities. This practical guide has been prepared by the Welsh Health Impact Assessment Support Unit, which was established by the Welsh Assembly Government to encourage and support organisations and groups in Wales to use the approach.
4. The development and use of health impact assessment will contribute to the ongoing development and implementation of local health, social care and well-being strategies, which is a joint statutory responsibility for Local Health Boards and local authorities. It can also contribute to Community Strategies which, given their overarching nature and breadth and depth, can address social, economic and environmental determinants of health, and to the implementation of Communities First, the Welsh Assembly Government's crosscutting regeneration programme.
5. The development of Health Challenge Wales as the national focus for improving health in Wales reinforces efforts to prevent ill health. Tools such as health impact assessment can help organisations and groups in all sectors to identify ways in which they can help people to improve their health.

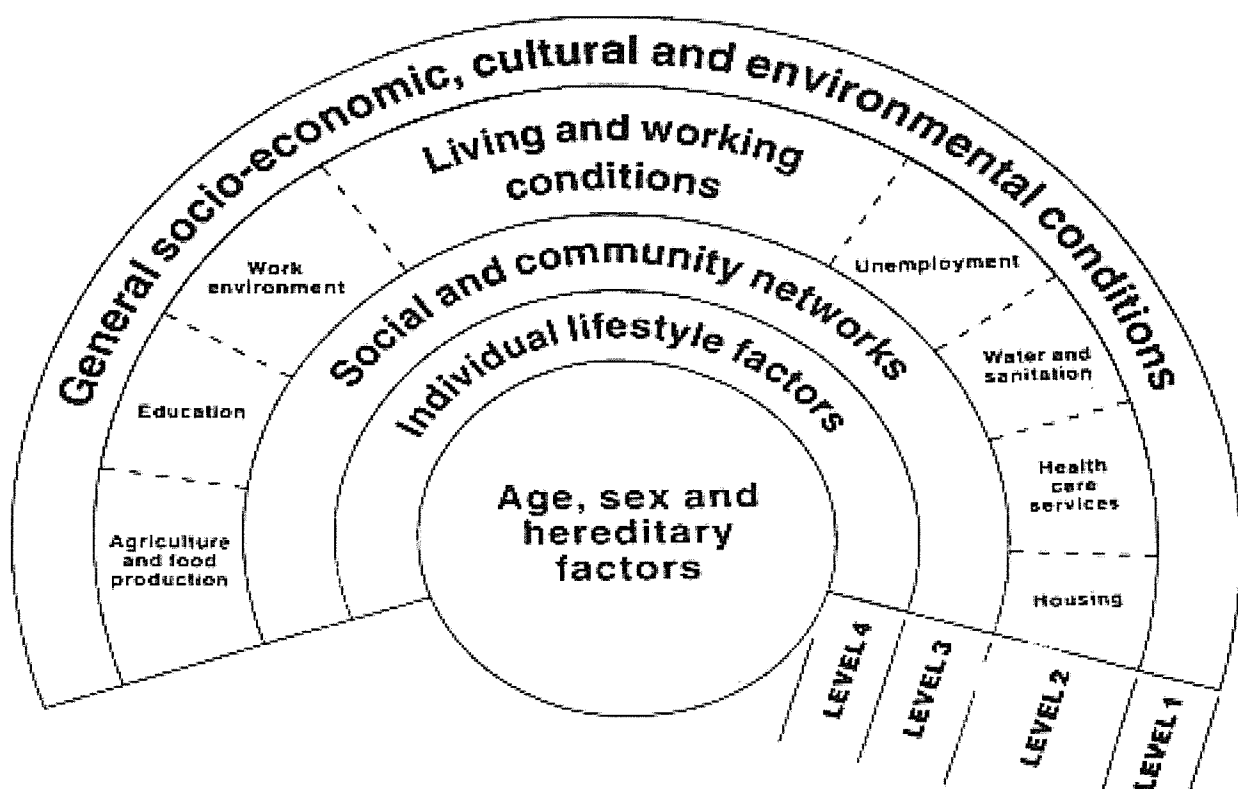
## What is 'health and well-being'?

6. 'Health' is often perceived as simply the absence of disease. However, the World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'. This suggests:
  - Health is a positive concept to which governments, statutory agencies, voluntary organisations, businesses, communities and individuals can all contribute.
  - People's sense of well-being can be poor even where there is no 'identifiable disease'.

7. As the WHO points out 'the policies that are the most successful in sustaining and improving the health of the population are those which deal with economic growth, human development and health in an integrated way'.<sup>2</sup>

## What affects people's health and well-being?

8. The environment, income, employment, education, the organisation of transport, the design and condition of houses, crime, and the social and physical condition of local neighbourhoods all contribute to good and poor health. These factors are often called the determinants of health. Health impact assessment considers how a proposal or policy might affect these determinants in order to assess the likely impact on the health of different groups in a population.



Source: Based on Dahlgren G and Whitehead M (1991) *Policies and strategies to promote social equity in health*. Stockholm, Institute for Futures Studies.

A list of factors that can affect people's health and well-being is provided in Appendix 1.

## What is health impact assessment?

9. Health impact assessment has been defined as

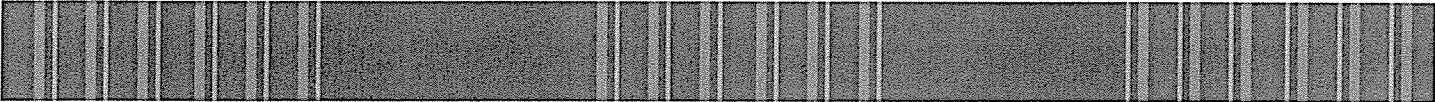
*...a combination of procedures, methods and tools by which a policy, programme or project may be judged as to its potential effects on the health of a population, and the distribution of those effects within the population.<sup>3</sup>*

10. It provides a systematic yet flexible framework that can be used to consider the wider effects of local and national policies or initiatives and how they, in turn, may affect people's health. Some of the effects may be positive, while others could be more harmful. The aim is to remove or mitigate any possible negative impacts on people's health and well-being and to maximise opportunities to help people improve their health.
11. The above definition is useful in that it reflects the fact that there is no single way of conducting an assessment. The combination of procedures, methods and tools used will depend on both the decision-making structures of the organisation undertaking health impact assessments and the proposal in question. Flexibility is necessary to ensure the best approach is taken in the given circumstances.<sup>4</sup>
12. The definition also highlights the inequalities dimension as policies, programmes or other developments can affect groups within a given population in different ways.

## Why use it?

13. The benefits of using health impact assessment include:

- Promotion of greater equity in health.
- Increased awareness amongst policy and decision-makers across sectors of how the decisions may affect health.
- Identification of the connections between health and developments in other policy areas.
- Better co-ordination of action between sectors to improve and protect health.
- Promotion of evidence and knowledge-based planning and decision-making.
- Action to allow health benefits to be maximised and health risks to be minimised.
- Investment in more action to enable people to prevent ill health.

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14. Health impact assessment can also help to make decision-making processes more transparent. It can, in some cases, provide opportunities to involve the people who will be affected by, or have an interest in, the decision.<sup>5</sup>

## Is there a single approach?

15. Most health impact assessments follow the stages outlined in this guidance but where necessary, some of these can be combined. This may need to happen due to the time and resources available, the quality and availability of appropriate evidence and/or the level of complexity of the proposal in question. This highlights the flexibility of the health impact assessment approach.
16. Health impact assessment can be used as a stand-alone tool or as an integrated part of other impact assessment tools. Develop it in ways that fit the circumstances, that makes the best use of resources in your organisation, within the time available.
17. The templates and working sheets appended to this guidance can be adapted to suit your needs.

## When should you use health impact assessment?

18. Health impact assessment is best used prospectively during the development of a proposal. The process should be activated late enough in a proposal's development to be clear about its nature and purpose but early enough to be able to influence its design and/or implementation.
19. As well as prospective health impact assessments, it can also be done concurrently or retrospectively:
- *Concurrent* assessments can be used when a proposal is being implemented and when it is subject to review.
  - *Retrospective* assessments can be undertaken after action has been completed. Retrospective assessments can also be made of unexpected events and as a way of learning lessons for future similar events.<sup>6</sup>
20. Assessments can be:
- 'Rapid' (completed in hours or days).
  - 'In-depth' (completed in weeks or months).



## Principles underlying health impact assessment

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21. Policy in Wales emphasises many of the principles that are reflected in the health impact assessment concept. For example, a way of working that promotes openness, partnership and participation. The overall vision is for a *'sustainable future for Wales where action for social, economic and environmental improvement work together to create positive change'*.<sup>7</sup>

### Openness

22. The process should be recorded to ensure openness and transparency.

### Participation

23. Health impact assessment works best when people with the relevant knowledge and skills work in partnership. This includes people working in public, voluntary and private organisations as well as local communities.

### Democracy/listening to people's views

24. This emphasises the rights of people to participate in major decisions that affect their lives. Health impact assessments can provide a means of enabling citizens to participate in decision-making processes.

### Sustainability

25. Taking in consideration impacts that are long-term as well as short-term, indirect as well as direct, provides a strong basis for the sustainability of policies, programmes and projects. The involvement of citizens can also contribute to the development of proposals that are acceptable and appropriate to local people, and are therefore more likely to be sustained.

### Equity

26. There should be a presumption in favour of reducing health inequalities. The health impact assessment process provides a mechanism to ensure that any potential negative impacts are minimised and that opportunities are taken to improve the health and well-being of vulnerable population groups.



## Ethical use of evidence

27. Evidence should not be used selectively to support one particular viewpoint or interest. As comprehensive assessment of the evidence as possible should be undertaken within available time and resources.

# How to use health impact assessment

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## Understanding the approach

28. Health impact assessment offers a systematic yet flexible way of gathering information to inform plans and decision-making, based on available evidence. By being flexible and realistic, it is an approach that can improve decision-making without imposing excessive demands on resources or creating unnecessary bureaucracy. Although the process can sound rather technical, it is a simple process with five main stages. Throughout the document we refer to 'the proposal' by which we mean the project, programme, policy or other development for which the impacts are to be assessed.
29. As you work through steps 1-5, refer to Appendices 1 to 5 at the end of the document. Where you see references to the 'tool', it includes Appendices 4a to 4c.

### **Step one: Screening – deciding whether a health impact assessment is necessary**

#### **Purpose**

30. There needs to be a simple way of identifying which proposals should undergo a 'rapid' or an 'in-depth' assessment. In its simplest form 'screening' means stepping back as early as possible in the planning and development process to ask the question: *could this proposal have an impact on, or implications for, people's health or any factors which determine people's health?*
31. This stage is quick to do and provides a preliminary picture of the potential health impacts on relevant population in order to help you make the decision. In particular it will indicate:
- whether the proposal is likely to impact on health;
  - which sections of the population, particularly vulnerable groups, are likely to be affected? An initial list of vulnerable and/or disadvantaged groups is provided in Appendix 2;
  - the possible scale of the impacts and whether these are likely to be positive or negative;
  - whether a 'rapid' or 'in-depth' health impact assessment is needed.





## The people involved

32. Ideally, this stage should be more than a desktop exercise conducted by one person. It may be done at a short meeting or through individual discussions. Input from public health professionals, relevant experts and representatives from key stakeholder groups is important.

## Preparation

33. Before meeting with other stakeholders you should ensure that there is a clear description of the proposal and its rationale, aims and objectives. A basic profile of the people living in the population area likely to be affected, where possible, may also be helpful. Circulate these to all participants in good time before the meeting.

## Recording the information

34. The health impact assessment screening or appraisal tool provides a means of recording the information behind your decision. This will be important if you are asked to justify or give reasons why a health impact assessment has or has not taken place. For this stage, you may find the notes on using the screening/assessment tool and the screening record sheet useful. These are at Appendix 3 and Appendix 4a.
35. If you have decided that there is a need to do more to consider the possible impact(s), follow steps 2-5.

## **Step two: Scoping – determining the focus, methods and work plan**

### **Purpose**

36. This stage involves asking a number of questions and making a number of decisions to establish the terms of reference and agreed plan for the health impact assessment:

- What are the timescales for undertaking the assessment?
- Geographical boundaries of project?
- What impacts/determinants should the appraisal focus on?
- What financial and human resources are available?
- What kind of assessment is necessary and/or possible in the time available – rapid to in-depth?
- Should a steering group be set up and who should be involved?
- Roles and responsibilities?
- How should decision-makers be involved?
- Who are the stakeholders and how should they be involved?
- Should the assessment be an in-house exercise or should it be commissioned?
- What methods to collect evidence could be used?

### **Timescale**

37. Consider the decision-making timescales of the proposal to try and ensure that the health impact assessment can have an opportunity to influence the final decisions. The timescale will also shape the decision you make about the kind of health impact assessment you are able to undertake.

### **Geographical boundaries**

38. Consider any geographical boundaries of the health impact assessment, i.e. is it an electoral ward, local authority area or a region? Some impacts may impinge on populations beyond those directly affected by the proposal so it will be important to decide your boundaries and the reasons for this.

39. Depending on the geographical focus of your assessment, you may wish to make use of the needs assessment undertaken as part of the development of local Health, Social Care and Well-Being Strategies. These documents are key resources for health impact assessments conducted at a county, or sub-county, level and are available from your Local Health Board.



## Focus

40. To ensure the best use of scarce resources, focus on those impacts that are most likely to occur and have the biggest potential impact on health and inequalities. Using the screening tool (Appendices 4a-c), identify which areas of impact the appraisal should focus on. In other words, which determinants are likely to be most affected and have the greatest impact on health? In addition, on which population groups should the assessment focus?

## Resources

41. Clarify what resources are available in terms of additional funding and people's time. You will need to develop an approach that makes the best use of the resources you have at your disposal. If health impact assessment is to develop as a routine aspect of decision-making then in most cases it should not need additional resources. It should be viewed as an opportunity to improve planning and decision-making process. However there may be some health impact assessments, for example large policy developments, that require more extensive work, involving additional data collection or a literature review. Appointing someone external to undertake this task is one option, but alternative options such as secondments where someone within your organisation has the opportunity to acquire skills may prove to be more valuable and create a sustainable resource for the organisation in the longer term.

## Scale of assessment

42. The scale of your assessment will depend on the timescales, the resources available and the complexity of the project. Rapid assessments can involve a single stakeholder meeting and a report. More comprehensive assessments can take months and involve systematic literature reviews, new data collection and expert analysis. The rapid form of assessment is likely to be suitable, and the most feasible, in most cases.

## Steering group

43. A steering group is not essential but can provide an effective means of distributing tasks and helps to promote wider participation in, and ownership of, the process. It may not be appropriate in the case of a rapid assessment. If you decide to establish a group, you will need people who can provide specific knowledge. Community representatives in particular may have particular insights as to how proposals will affect local people, and you may also wish to include specialists from your local public health team, and others with specialist knowledge in the social sciences, epidemiology, environmental health or health economics, as appropriate.



## Stakeholders

44. Those who are likely to be affected by, or involved in the development or implementation of the proposal should be identified. Decide how they should be involved in the process, perhaps as providers of expert evidence, as members of the steering group or as recipients of the report.
45. In particular, consider the involvement of key decision-makers as experience of conducting health impact assessments highlighted the importance of identifying these at the outset and involving them in the process in an appropriate way.<sup>8</sup> This might include being informed of progress made by the steering group. In some cases, their involvement in public meetings where local people are present can have benefits.<sup>9</sup>